

Toni Johnson-Woods introduces the Library's latest publication, her book *Pulp: A Collector's Book of Australian Pulp Fiction Covers*

They were the colourful novelettes which once cluttered newsstands, crowded newsagent's shelves, and lay tumbling about in barbers' shops—but today few copies exist. Despite their proliferation, little has been written about the thousands of novelette titles made for the Australian reader of the mid-twentieth century. Buyers had a dazzling array of choices for their pennies: western, romance, adventure, science fiction, horror, or detective. It was disposable fiction—meant to be read and discarded. And like mass-produced fiction of any time, the books' very popularity condemned them in the eyes of parents, moral guardians and librarians. Today, we shake our heads at the innocent covers and even more innocuous contents that once offended, and sigh for the many lost works of one of the most ignored chapters in Australian publishing history.

When writing *Pulp: A Collector's Book of Australian Pulp Fiction Covers*, I covered the tables in the National Library's Petherick Room with these brightly coloured paperbacks—and many people stopped to leaf through them, sharing their reminiscences with me. Unfortunately, the copies we looked at are unique: very few others appear to exist.

In 1939, Australians protested the importation of American pulp magazines: millions were landed in Sydney, underselling locally produced material. Artists and writers lobbied politicians—joined, from another point of view, by parents, educators and religious groups who demanded the banning of 'objectionable' magazines. With World War II, all non-essential imports were halted. After the war and the lifting of paper rationing, local publishers, writers and artists found an eager market for cheap, mass-produced 'pulp' fiction of an Australian kind. Hundreds of thousands of soft-covered novelettes ('digests', in librarian-speak) began to spew from the presses each month.

Nearly all the locally written pulp fiction emanated from Sydney companies: Action Comics, Calvert Publishing, Cleveland Publishing, Currawong and Horwitz Books. (See Graeme Flanagan's *The Australian*



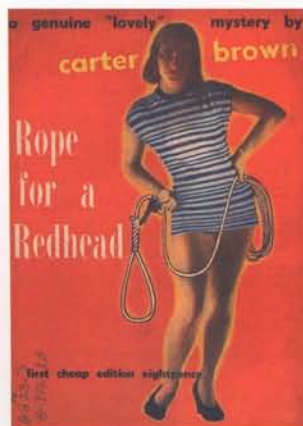
GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN:

AUSTRALIAN PULP FICTION 1939-59

Vintage Paperback Guide, New York: Gryphon, 1994 for more information.) Most of these companies started as small concerns printing comics, magazines and trade journals; many others blossomed and died, but two of them still exist today: Cleveland and Horwitz. These companies printed thousands of print runs of dozens of new titles each month—in the mid-1950s Horwitz published 24 titles each month, and Cleveland printed 18 westerns each month (12 originals, and six reprints). To feed the public's fiction appetite the publishers needed reliable writers—ones who could churn out material of a certain length, in a set genre, and within a short period of time.

Australia did not have a ready supply of experienced authors, so many amateurs were press-ganged into service. Gordon Bleeck (1907-1971) was one such writer, and the entries in his diary in the National Library's Gordon Clive Bleeck Collection shed light on the frenetic world of pulp fiction at the time: 'Denny White rang for 12 000 word boxing, 10 000 racing and 6000 other sport [stories]. In 3 or 4 weeks.' (Diary 15 August 1950). Earlier in the year, Alastair Innes at Horwitz Books had suggested the following schedule: '2 western shorts, 1 scientific short

Gordon Clive Bleeck writing stories at his desk, 1962
Reproduced from *Portrait of an Author: A Biography of Gordon Clive Bleeck* by Peter Bleeck
Manuscript Collection, MS 9204



above:
Cover reproduced from *Rope for a Redhead* by Carter Brown (Sydney: Transport Publishing, 195-?)

top:
Cover reproduced from *One Sided Romance* by G.C. Bleek (Sydney: Action Comics, 1953)
Thanks to Gordon and Gotch for their permission to use this photograph

each month, and 24 000 word space opera every two months' (Diary 10 February 1950). (For more on Bleek, see my earlier story in *National Library of Australia News*, November 2002.)

Bleek was one of hundreds of such writers—all of them prolific. Yet, if not for his collection and relating papers held at the National Library, Bleek would have virtually been erased from Australian literary history; (less than one-third of his 300 books are listed in Flanagan's book). Both he and Len Meares contributed to Cleveland's Johnny Nelson series; Meares (1921–1993) also wrote over 100 westerns under the various pseudonyms of Marshall Grover, Ward Brennan, and Glenn Murrell for Cleveland, and more than 400 western titles (as Marshall Grover, and Marshall McCoy) for Horwitz. Des R. Dunn (a Queenslander) and Don Haring (an expatriate American) are attributed with around 400 Larry Kent

novels. Kent's rival Carter Brown (Alan G. Yates) has nearly 300 titles in his mystery series. Little is known about Richard Wilkes-Hunter, Keith Hetherington, or those who contributed to the 200-odd Cleveland novelettes (1956–58). Because of the paucity of company records, we may never know who actually wrote what during this period.

Bleek and his ilk were not temperamental artists agonising over every word choice: they were piecemeal workers who churned out thousands of words a day on manual typewriters. The pay was ordinary—about one pound per thousand words. But there was plenty of work available, and it supplemented Bleek's other income by about 50 per cent.

Crime is the pulp fiction genre par excellence, but before the 1950s crime-wave hit, writers had sharpened their skills on other genres. In the mid-1940s, the western was the premier genre—the mythic West, with its masculinist, homosocial world and concerns about property and ownership was closest to the Australian bushranging, gold digger, settler fiction of the nineteenth century. At the end of the 1950s, westerns had been supplanted by science fantasies—not surprisingly, the genre exposed the anxieties of a post-war Australia: the threat of nuclear wars, mind-altering techniques, and 'mad scientists'. Around the same time, romance fiction concerned itself with the changing role of women; office romances and careers featured strongly and women were duly warned about the dangers of choosing work over marriage. By the early 1950s, publishers were asking local writers for American crime fiction. Soon dozens of detective heroes were competing for readers' pennies: intrepid traveller Carl Dekker, newspaper reporter Marc Brody, advertising executive Martin Kane, journalist J.C. Jason, and insurance investigator Johnny Buchanan.

If the stories seem repetitive, that's because authors were given specific instructions from the editorial group who created the series: Audrey Armitage (co-author of the K.T. McCall books) was told to include three women in each Johnny Buchanan novel—one blonde, one brunette and one redhead. While working as an editor at Horwitz, C.J. McKenzie remembered that Stanley Horwitz went so far as to suggest a fiction production line: one person would

write the outline, another the protagonists, and another the dialogue. Horwitz was quite disgruntled when writers resisted the idea.

Reading these stories today, one can still see their appeal. They are fast-paced narratives, easy to read and lively in their descriptions. These days they provide delightful insights into the social and sexual mores of the 1950s: when everyone smoked, but no woman drank; when robots and interplanetary travel would be viable by the 1970s, and when the 'mob' was the greatest threat to law and order.

An important part of the books' impact was the cover. These covers retain an unshakeable hold on cultural memory. They are remembered for their feverish depictions of 'high-octane' moments. The most outstanding feature was the scantily clad dame: it didn't matter that the crime series were about male detectives, the covers lovingly depicted sexually idealised women who posed, pouted and promised more than the stories ever delivered.

At first, many of the covers adopted comic-book style designs, especially the westerns and romances. In the mid-1950s, some publishers tried photographic covers, but hand-colouring the black-and-white photographs was too expensive; it was cheaper to hire an artist. (Unfortunately, most of the original artwork has disappeared, though the National Library Pictures Collection does retain a few.)

Often there is a complete disjunction between cover and content, because while the artists painted, the authors wrote—cover and text were only brought together at the end. This disparity explains some of the humorous mismatches: Bleeck's *One Sided-Romance* is about a British milliner's romance—the Australian beach scene cover is totally irrelevant. On the other hand, Bleeck was also often asked to specifically write to a cover: 'Miss Horwitz called for a story for cover—already printed. *Exile in Space*, by Ace Carter' (Diary, 11 September 1950).

If the lurid covers didn't grab your attention, then the titillating titles should—who could resist *Nude in a Boot*, *The Curse of Blood*, or *Designed to Deceive*? It didn't take long for the pulps to attract the attention of the censors, and soon the Queensland Literary Board had banned a handful of fiction. But readers probably did

not notice the few titles missing from the newsstands: there were hundreds more from which to choose. Disappointed with this month's offering?—there'll be another next month. Then suddenly, overnight, they all disappeared. In 1959, import restrictions were lifted and dozens of local companies closed down. American fiction reappeared, and gone was the local pulp fiction industry.

Pulp of course was the opposite of literary fiction; most of the stories were poorly edited and grammatically questionable. The dialogue can be awkward and coincidences abound, but who had time for polishing when the next book had to be out in a fortnight? Because the stories were written, printed and sold within weeks, the novels respond to the immediate concerns and desires of their authors and their times, and provide today's readers with a snapshot into a long-gone Australia. Few copies now survive, and there are no complete runs of any one author—sadly, as with most popular fiction, it was too ephemeral and too entertaining to warrant critical examination.

It was too ubiquitous to imagine it not always being there. But now it isn't. The books may be gone, but they are certainly not forgotten.

DR TONI JOHNSON-WOODS, author of *Pulp: A Collector's Book of Australian Pulp Fiction Covers*, lectures in Contemporary Studies at the University of Queensland



above:
Cover reproduced from *Go Lightly, Stranger* by Des R. Dunn (Sydney: Cleveland Publishing, 195-?)

below:
Covers reproduced from Don Haring's *Blonde Indemnity*, *Bye, Bye, Benny* and *Lady Scorpio* (Sydney: Cleveland Publishing, 195-?)

